Callie Friedman

Ms. Krafft

AML 2410, Section 8974

November 7, 2013

Response Paper 4

*White Noise,* written by Don DeLillo, speaks to a very modern audience. Based in the 1980s, the language and tone of the novel relate to a more easygoing mindset and attitude. Jack, the main character, runs the Hitler Studies department at the College-on-the-Hill. His wife, Babette, and four children, all from different marriages, all help to add to the picture of Jack’s “American” style of living. A great deal of this novel can be somewhat hard to decipher at times, due to its ambiguity and randomness. There are events that occur that sometimes have nothing to do with anything and are not explained. DeLillo uses these events to portray a small town society and Jack as entities with lost purpose and questionable meaning.

Jack and his colleague, Murray, describe a tourist attraction known as “The Most Photographed Barn in America.” Murray goes into great detail describing how the actual event of taking a picture of the barn is not important. Instead, people take photographs of the barn to be able to say they completed the task. When they were driving up to the barn, Jack made sure to mention that he “counted five signs before we reached the site” (12). This detail demonstrated that there was more build up and anticipation for the barn than the actual sight of it. Murray describes the act of visiting the barn as reinforcing an “aura” (12). He also mentions that people do not show up to “capture and image, we’re here to maintain one” (12). When reading this passage, it is almost as if Jack and Murray are explaining the barn as something with lost meaning. People continue to visit it, but they do not think about why.

As the department chair of Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill, Jack describes a time back in 1968 when he was first becoming a “Hitler innovator” (16). He explains to Babette that the chancellor told him to change his name and appearance if he wanted to be taken seriously in his profession. The chancellor suggested adding an extra initial to his name, gaining weight, and becoming more ugly. Jack even began to wear glasses to fit the part. Looking back, it is clear Jack followed every instruction he was given without thinking about himself and whether or not he wanted to make those changes. From that point on, he was living his life in a way that did not represent his true self. He admits, “I am the false character that follows the name around” (17).

When Jack attends one of Murray’s Elvis lectures, he begins to chime in on the discussion. Murray and Jack dispute and compare both Elvis’s and Hitler’s relationships with their mothers. When they get to the topic of death, Jack has the realization that the idea of death causes people to lose their identity. He describes the thousands of people and crowds that gathered when Hitler’s mother died. However, he also explains that they were not really there to commemorate her life. They were there to be a crowd. Jack says, “To become a crowd is to keep out death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone” (73). This description of a crowd just adds to the list of things that make one lose their identity.

DeLillo makes it very clear that this novel expresses a society with lost identity. There are many aspects that relate to a sense of acting because they think it is what they should do, or because it seems as though they should do it. It questions the motives and effects of a society that already has issues.